

Raising Lawrence

**Review of *DH Lawrence around the World: South African Perspectives*
Edited by Jim Phelps and Nigel Bell
Echoing Green Press, 2007. R295**

Reviewed by Dr David Bunyan

Its title gives little clue to how important this collection may well prove – and for reasons which go beyond the prime intentions of its hard-working editors, I feel. It's clear from the Introduction that they somewhat fondly hope to rekindle a Lawrence revival, a renewal of the kind of attention Lawrence attracted in the mid third of the twentieth century. In truth, this once staple writer's reputation has considerably diminished, and is probably due for some fair reassessment. But this isn't where the major interest in this collection of academic essays and some poems lies. In fact it may well appeal to readers who have no overriding interest in Lawrence as such, and I hope it reaches them. This importance is as much a matter of timing, as of anything else. Perhaps more than for any comparable writer, the past and present state of Lawrence teaching or non-teaching in this country defines a historic moment for university studies and culture generally, and this book helps us to understand it and its implications in as dramatic a way as anything could.

The first section of the book is a set of critical reminiscences by highly respected local and émigré university teachers, who each recount the history of their own and their departments' encounters with Lawrence's works. There's an extra pleasure here in a communal demonstration of flexible, intelligent and articulate writing such as one easily despairs of finding these days. The best of them are unsparingly honest and informative, and give a unique and sometimes raw insight into departmental politics and fashions over the period – while by the way providing the natural context and setting for the rest of the book. Geoffrey Haresnape's contribution, say, should probably be read early on, for just this reason.

The reason why Lawrence, in particular, should be such a catalytic figure has as much to do with another 'L's' merits, as with his own. Acute readers will notice that the name Leavis figures almost as many times in these pages as does the novelist/poet's, and the story of Leavis's influence on the shaping of English Departments is the real subtext here. Though most advocated at Pietermaritzburg, Stellenbosch, and UNISA, it was for or against this influence that the whole subsequent history of 'Eng. Lit.' was measured from the 1950s onwards, and – for better or worse – Lawrence was co-opted as its figurehead. Even the seminal formal critical essays that follow have thus to be taken as our own local contribution to a powerful debate. They include a particularly interesting article by Chris Thurman on how Butler's own 'strange gods' stand up against Lawrence's, but there's much more food for thought here than could easily be anticipated. Old students of our venerable institutions will find much to remember and identify with; but as a document to a deeply influential, combative, opinionated but passing world this collection has lasting value. And that passing world may just be English Departments as we've known them.